

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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SELJUQ CULTURAL HISTORY – Innovation

Overview

As peoples who had only recently converted to Islam and were in the process of assimilating not only a new religion, but also the cultural legacy of the Islamic world at a time when the New Persian language was beginning to supplant Arabic as the language of administration and literature in the eastern regions, the Qarakhanids, Oghuz and Seljuqs were perhaps not yet in the best position to make their contributions to this culture. Nevertheless, the Qarakhanids and the Seljuqs of Rum did make their own unique contributions to Islamic civilization and culture.

The Seljuqs of Rum

In comparison to the Great Seljuqs, innovation is a more obvious feature of the culture, army and administration of the Seljuqs of Rum. This is primarily due to the fact that the Seljuqs of Rum were establishing a Muslim state in lands that had just been conquered from the Byzantines. Muslim rule was new to these lands, the majority of the population was Christian, architectural and artistic traditions were different from those of the Islamic world, knowledge of Arabic and Persian was practically non-existent, and, in many regions of Anatolia, the environment was quite different from that of Iraq and Syria. As a result, the Seljuqs were forced to innovate in the process of establishing their rule and creating a Muslim society in the lands of Rum.

Rum Seljuq architecture differs from Great Seljuq architecture in a number of ways. While certain elements of Great Seljuq architecture, such as *muqarnas*, are utilized in Rum Seljuq buildings, the most common building material in the lands of Rum was stone, rather than brick as in the Great Seljuq empire. This alone gives Rum Seljuq architecture a distinct appearance. In addition, the elaborate stone carving found around the entrances of mosques, madrasas, caravanserais, and on the exterior of many mausoleums is characteristic of Rum Seljuq architecture, but almost entirely absent in Great Seljuq architecture.

Another area of Rum Seljuq innovation is in the composition of their army. While the Rum Seljuq army had most of the elements of the Great Seljuq army, there were two unique elements in Rum. The first was the use of western, generally Frankish, mercenaries and the other was units of *igdish / mixobarbaroi*, men of mixed (generally Greek-Turkish) parentage. Such units were the result of the conditions in the Sultanate of Rum in the 11th-13th centuries, conditions not found in the Great Seljuq lands, and provided the Seljuq army with capabilities that its Turkmen units did not have.

In their bureaucracy, the Seljuqs of Rum faced challenges unknown in the Great Seljuq state. In both states the primary languages of administration were Persian and, to a lesser degree, Arabic. The Great Seljuqs could fill positions in their bureaucracy by simply seeking out educated local people, since both languages were the main languages spoken in their territories. However, these two languages were unknown to the Greeks and Armenians who made up the majority of the inhabitants in the Sultanate of Rum. As a result, positions in the bureaucracy were often filled by educated immigrants, many from Khorasan. On the other hand, the fact that the Seljuqs of Rum had commercial and political relations with Byzantines and western Europeans, meant that they did require officials in their chancellery capable of preparing documents and correspondence in a language they understood, Greek.

Readings

Cahen, Claude. *The Formation of Turkey: The Seljukid Sultanate of Rūm: Eleventh to Fourteenth Century*. Harlow, 2001.

Mecit, Songül. *The Rum Seljuqs: Evolution of a Dynasty*. London, 2014.

Rice, Tamara Talbot. *The Seljuks in Asia Minor*. New York, 1966.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the primary reason that innovation in a number of fields is seen more among the Seljuqs of Rum than the Great Seljuqs?